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From the Other Side of the Street — The \$15 Monograph

Column Editor: **Thomas Bacher** (Director, Purdue University Press) <bacher@purdue.edu>

I don't want to say this too loudly so come on a little closer. That's right, get right up next to the magazine. Perfect. Now listen carefully, I have to whisper. I want to bring the monograph back. That's right. I want to pave a new avenue of important scholarly works, a new Fifth Avenue, a new Champs Elysées, a new Miracle Mile. And I want to be prepared to lose money doing it (but I want to break even if I can). I want to produce, with cover and pages, the truly affordable, portable, palatable \$15 monograph.

I was going to do a costing model for this new sort of product, but over the weekend, thinking about the scenarios like NCAA basketball tournament match-up possibilities, I simply stopped. I'd given up the goat anyway and nothing in my planning could make this proposal a consistent winner.

The notion of the delightful, insightful \$15 monograph came to me at our last monthly editorial board meeting. Surrounded by academics whose personal libraries were being depleted by rising costs, the idea popped into my head out of the blue like bird do do on my windshield. Impetuous intuition was the driving force so scientific economics wouldn't work to justify the probable loss involved. I braved on with a simple slogan, "Nothing lost. Nothing gained."

In troubled times, I was taught to take more risks, contradict the odds, and plunge in headfirst. Prices were going up all around. Here was an initiative to put the university press finger in the dike before the landscape flooded and turned scholarly communication into the likes of Big League baseball. Do your children know what a double header is? Or that they used to play World Series games before the evening news?

I wasn't about to publish these clever, never-say-never \$15 monographs haphazardly, but there would be some caveats. First of all, a press like Purdue University Press is well-staffed for the effort. In fact, we have such a bare-bone organization that we could almost be called a virtual entity. Probably, if I were smart enough, I'd partner with our school of technology and create virtual press glasses for several administrators at Purdue and let them see it the way I wanted them to see it. We'd be rolling in the dough then.

Since the press is on a calorically-limited diet, we don't have an acquisition editor. As the Director, I acquire books on the side mostly through email transactions and helpful hints from faculty on the press's editorial board and in various schools on campus. The Managing Editor for the press also acquires books, but spends more of her time overseeing the

copyediting and proofreading tasks at hand. We have a Production Manager who works half time

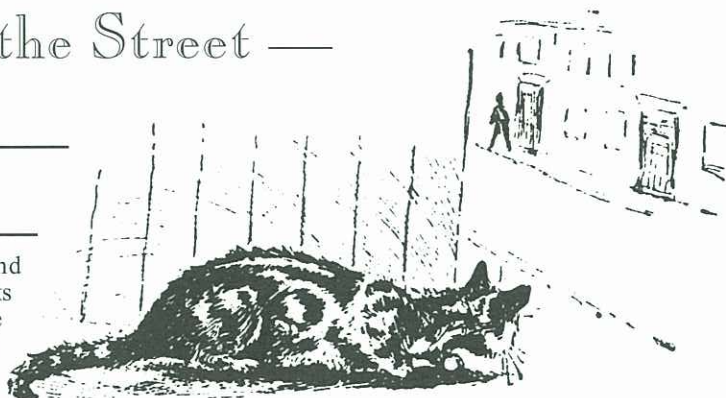
to make sure that our books get to the printer and look good. We do all order entry in-house with one Customer Service person. We fill in our needs with several students and interns who add a lively and fresh feeling to the organization on a daily basis.

I double as the Marketing Manager and we are committed to spending our monies on publicity and direct mail. We really can't afford a great deal of advertising, but that doesn't bother us because we think advertising, in bits and pieces, is really ineffective. The Press's staff produces about twenty books a year. We are contemplating producing a journal or two under the same organizational structure. Our mantra is to hire staff as needed to complete projects and, for the most part, we expect that staff to be freelance in nature. In other words, we're trying to keep our overhead as low as possible and the quality bar as high as possible.

"Are you nuts?" a few of the editorial board members asked. "Nuts," I said, "was taking a step out of step and the time had come to step in it!" I assured the puzzled few that we would keep up on our peer review (You get two scholars in a boat and let them trek around Manhattan to make sure that none of the deck supports are rotting!) by allocating \$500 for the review process. Two scholars would be sought out for their esteemed opinions which would be presented to the board for their esteemed approval. This would be the birth of the cogent, consistent, credible \$15 monograph.

"You can't be serious," my Managing Editor intoned. "Serious," I replied. "Serious is an affliction of the status quo and we have little status and certainly no quo." After the mutters subsided, I took matters into my own hands. We will allocate \$1000 to the copyediting process (but hope to spend only about \$750). We will not ask the copyeditor to rewrite anything, but only make sure that the manuscript conforms to our house style and query on inconsistencies and obvious mistakes. We want to give voice to the author and we want to keep our mouths shut.

Also, we will allocate \$1000 for typesetting. In fact our hope is to spend none of this money and do the job in-house. If the manuscript has to go out of house we will use one of our local typesetter's standard styles and pay roughly \$4/page for the material. We expect these well-crafted, didactic, \$15 mono-



graphs to be between 228 and 288 pages. The cover would be a nice two-color one with mostly type and perhaps some author-supplied and rights-paid-for photo.

My Production Manager said, "Hey Tom, are you crazy?" I replied "Craziness was the best part of life and find me the best service at the best price." She came back after hours of intense negotiation and said that we could get 800 copies of our \$15 monograph printed for \$3.50 each. Our printing bill would be, give or take, \$3000 per book.

Now it was my turn. I berated myself with every good reason not to go ahead with the project. "How are you going to market it?" I asked myself. Myself smiled back and said, "About \$1500 worth through our seasonal catalogs, Internet mailings, review media and author-assisted publicity." "And royalties?" Myself retorted. "An incentive plan. Five percent on the first printing. Once we've covered our costs we'll split the take with the author."

Now I was talking and I was hoping that no one was listening or I might find myself in a new jacket and it wouldn't be a book jacket for sure. The finished, famous, fabulous \$15 monograph, would only be available in a paperback edition and would only be available at list price. No discounts would be afforded to any organization, neither wholesalers nor bookstore. Only demand would tell if the strategy would work, but if clients of the wholesalers and bookstores wanted the book, those clients would probably be charged a few dollars extra by their vendors.

The primary audience for the book would be individual scholars in the field and graduate students who would hopefully take advantage of the price to own a copy of the \$15 monograph, calling to order via our 800 number or through a direct mail solicitation. Libraries could order directly from the press or persuade their suppliers to provide the book.

It was the end of the day and as you're supposed to do at the end of the day, I was going to add all the press's costs together. I was going to determine the unit price. I was going to do some multiplication and division. But I knew it wouldn't add up. Then again, university presses have service obligations. What better service could we provide than the economical, equitable, inexpensive \$15 monograph. 🐾